**“Seeking *Peace* on Earth… means *avoiding* war”**

*By*

*Rev. Dr. Paul A. Lance, Minister*

*First Congregational United Church of Christ*

*201 South Second Ave., Alpena, Michigan 49707*

*January 5, 2020*

 As I read this weekend’s *The Alpena News* (Sat-Sun, Jan. 4-5, 2020, top of the front page), I was surprised -- and saddened -- to learn that ***our American military*** was used on Friday to ***assassinate*** the highest-ranking general of Iran’s military while he was visiting Baghdad.

I was even more surprised, however, that the President said he authorized the strike “to ***stop*** a war”! Ihope he is telling the truth… although I do not understand ***how*** the killing of the second-most powerful person in Iran (after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) will somehow “***stop a war***” instead of ***start*** one. (!) It seems to me to be a ***provocation***, not a ***solution***. (!) But, then, what do I know? I’m not a politician… I’m just a local church minister in a small Michigan town.

I ***do*** know some ***history***, though. And ***you*** may ***also*** recall that back in the summer of **1914**, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire – second in power to the imperial throne: ***Archduke Franz Ferdinand*** – was ***killed*** in Sarajevo… leading to a quick military reprisal by the Austria/ Hungarians against Serbia. That’s how the ***First*** World War began! I would hate to see this week’s ***assassination*** of a high-ranking ***Iranian general*** start another.

But then, the President assures us that his intent was to “***stop*** *a war.”* So, I have to ask: ***which*** current war will be *stopped* by this military action?

The war in ***Iraq***, which is where the Iranian general was killed last week? Is ***that*** the one?

The war in Iraq began in 2003 by order of President George W. Bush. Over the past ***16 years***, it has caused ***more than 650,000 direct violent deaths*** (perhaps as many as 2,400,000 according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program) – ***2,362 of these war casualties*** were lost in ***2019 alone***. Is ***this*** the war that the assassination of the Iranian’s ***top*** General will stop?

Or, perhaps, America’s ***longest-running active war***: in Afghanistan.

America entered the Afghan Civil War in **2001** as a direct result of the terror attacks of ***Sept. 11***. Our intent was to topple the Taliban government. Eighteen years later, we are *negotiating for peace* with the Taliban leaders. ***I hope*** that “diplomatic relations” bring peace to that war-torn region***, but*** I don’t see *how* the killing of an Iranian Officer on Iraqi soil will ***add*** anything to the “peace process” in Afghanistan. (!) ***Their war actually started*** with the Russians (the Soviets invaded in 1978) and they were fighting for the next 11 years, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. ***Cumulative*** fatalities in the Soviet-Afghan Conflict, the Afghan Civil War, and America’s 18-year war ***is between 1,240,000 and 2,000,000*** people. Just last year alone, ***41,735*** people were killed in the on-going ***war in Afghanistan***.

I hope ***that’s*** the war that the President says will ***“stop”…*** finally!

Maybe he hopes his ***pre-emptive strike*** against the military in ***Iran*** will turn the tide on the ***Syrian*** Civil War that began in **2011** and has seen ***570,000 people killed*** and up to four million Syrian citizens ***displaced*** as refugees over the last 8 years. ***11,215*** of those deaths happened just last year. (!) The neighboring ***Turkish/Kurdish*** ***conflict*** which started back in **1984,** but which kicked up significantly ***five years ago*** in the fight against ISIS, has seen 45,000 casualties of war, -- 1,420 of those fatalities in 2019. The President’s back-&-forth alliance with the ***Kurdish*** forces -- sometimes ***standing with them*** against ISIS in Syria and then other times withdrawing from them as regards Turkey – makes me wonder ***who’s side we’re on***. (!)

Maybe the President thinks that killing the ***top Iranian*** General will ***tip*** ***the balance*** and bring an end to *the War in* ***Yemen*** – which began as an ***insurgency*** in South Yemen in 2011, and became a full-blown ***war*** in 2015 when Saudi Arabia led an ***“intervention”.*** More than 60,000 direct violent deaths have occurred in Yemen, with about 1/3 (20,882) just last year. I’m not sure ***how killing an Iranian*** would stop the ***Saudis*** from pursuing their war in Yemen, but it’s possible. It’s hard for an outsider (like me) to sort out the various warring sects and their militias & proxies within the Middle East.

The news reports that ***General*** ***Suleimani*** was the “driving force behind Iranian-sponsored attacks and operations over two decades around the region, including in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon.” I hope the President’s recent military action really ***does*** bring a stop to those wars. However, a simple reading of history tends to suggest otherwise.

Franz-Ferdinand (back in 1914) was not merely an Archduke, heir to the Imperial throne of ***Austria***. He was part of a ***Balkan Alliance***, which included national defense treaties with Germany and Italy. ***Serbia***, on the other hand, was ***allied with Russia***, who felt it was necessary to back Serbia when its capital (Belgrade) was shelled by the Austro-Hungarians on July 28, one month after the Archduke’s assassination. Full Russian mobilization against the Austrian Empire was announced on July 30. The very next day, the last day of July, Germany did the same against Russia.

What made things more difficult, though, was the fact that there was also a ***Triple Alliance pact*** between ***Russia, France, and Great Britain***. So, when ***Germany***, on the first of August -- in support of their ***ally*** Austria-Hungary -- declared ***war on Russia*** -- who had come to the defense of their ally ***Serbia*** – it followed suit that ***France*** then (on August 2nd) ordered full mobilization in support of ***Russia*** as part of the ***interlocking alliances***.

If it were not bad enough for ***Germany*** to now be fighting a war on ***two fronts*** – against ***France*** to the West and ***Russia*** to the East, on behalf of the Austrians & Hungarians to their ***South*** – their strategy was to ***(first)*** defeat the French vey ***quickly***, so that they ***(then)*** could shift the bulk of their forces to the East before Russia had time to fully mobilize.

To that end, ***Germany asked Belgium*** to give their troops “free passage” through their country so that they could achieve a quick victory over France. ***Belgium refused***, and so German forces ***invaded*** Belgium on Aug. 3, and declared ***war on France*** that very day. Belgium invoked the 1839 Treaty of London, under which Great Britain promised to come to their aid. ***The British complied*** with their treaty obligations and declared war on Germany on August 4th (because they had invaded Belgium to get to France).

And let’s not forget in the background was that ***Triple Alliance*** treaty that Great Britain had joined with both ***Russia & France*** over ***against*** Franz Ferdinand’s Austro-Hungarian Empire which was allied to Germany … so, on August 12, Britain & France further declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire … which provoked the ***Ottoman Empire*** (in Turkey & Arabia) to take sides with the Austrian & the German Kaiser’s Empires.

It had been less than a week between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and these ***several new wars***: Serbians & Russians against Austrian-Hungarians; Germans against Belgians, French, and Russians; the British against Germany & Austria. ***Italy***, who waited a year before getting involved with ***any*** of the others, eventually joined ***the Allies*** in Europe ***fighting*** the Germans …

***Russia*** quickly ***fell out*** of the First World War, even though ***they*** had been among the earliest instigators. (!) That’s because their population ***revolted in 1917***, replacing the ***Romanov Tsarist Empire*** with a Provisional Government of ***the People***, who refused to finance the war, called their military back, and created a Soviet Socialist Republic (and in March 1918, signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk) ***which ended Russia’s*** **involvement** in the war. **America** declared war on Germany **on April 6, 1917**, but did not send any trained US forces until mid-1918. Ultimately the American Expeditionary Force would reach some two million troops, in the nick of time, because the First World War would ***end*** on Nov. 11 that year.

I know all this is100 years ago – 1918. What does it have to do with 2020?

 The initial assertion that the President made last week -- that to ***assassinate*** an enemy officer (in this case, the second most powerful person in Iran, the Persian Empire) ***would “stop a war”*** -- is doubtful, when taken in an historical context. That very thing is what ***launched*** the First World War: the ***assassination*** of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

 Second, we see that national rulers take such things ***personally***, and are prone to ***strike back violently***... as America did after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Serbia was blamed for the assassination, so the Austrian Empire ***“paid them back” with military shelling*** of their capital city. ***Retaliation***, if not ***revenge***, is given as a ***reason*** to do further damage!

Third, ***violence escalates***. Russia felt ***obligated*** to come to Serbia’s defense; Germany, for the same reason, came to the Austrian-Hungarians aid. When ***Germany*** declared war on ***Russia*** because of its interference in Serbia, Russia called on ***its allies***, France and Britain, to fight the ***Germans***. Eventually 60 million Europeans were ***fighting each other*** because of interlocking treaty obligations, little of which had anything at all to do with the precipitating assassination that happened one week earlier.

Fourth, the ***Americans really had no dog in that fight***. Those were ***European*** treaties struck between Old World Empires and ethnic groups. The United States were ***an ocean away***, and we tended toward ***isolation*** and self-sufficiency. America didn’t get entangled until the very last year of that four year war. And we had hopes it would be “the war to ***end*** all wars.”

It was ***horrendous*** enough to cause a nation to think twice about the use of war as a means of foreign policy. It is estimated that ***nine million combatants*** and ***seven million civilian deaths*** were a direct result of the First World War, while associated “genocides” -- plus the ***1918 influenza epidemic*** which began during the war -- caused another 50- to 100-million deaths worldwide.

The war may not have ***ended “war”,*** but it ended *the era of**Empires*. The German Kaiser, the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, and the Russian Empires ***ceased to exist***, with numerous ***new nation-states*** arising from their remains. The League of Nations, which was proposed during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference as a means to prevent future wars through dialog and joint ventures, failed to prevent a ***Second World War*** just 20 years later.

Earlier in my sermon I spoke about ***five current conflicts*** throughout the Middle East in which our American military is ***actively involved***. .. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Kurdistan/Turkey Conflict. For ***even one*** of these five wars to ***stop***, would be a wonderful step toward peace on earth. To settle all five, would be a much bigger step.

Once we are out of ***those five*** conflicts, maybe we could assist the peace-making agenda in other wars: such as the ***Mexican Drug War*** which has claimed ***115,000 fatalities*** since 2006 – 17,608 just last year. It’s not a war with designated combatants, but it’s a major world conflict nonetheless.

Or, we could help resolve the ***Somali*** Civil War (at Mogadishu) which has claimed ***a half-a-million fatalities*** since 1991 – 2,637 in 2019 alone.

Or, we could help address the Libyan Crisis which began in 2014 and has already claimed between 30,-- – 42,000 fatalities. 2,200 just last year.

That’s how many ***big wars*** are being fought ***at this very minute***, even though we do not hear much about them in the news.

Lesser conflicts -- in ***number*** of annual fatalities, not necessarily in ***seriousness*** -- would include (1) the on-going stand-off between ***India & Pakistan*** (which has been ***smoldering*** since 1947), and the neighboring *insurgency* between *Pakistan &* ***Balochistan*** (since 1948), (2) the South ***Thailand*** insurgency (which began in 1960), (3) the ***Columbian*** conflict (since 1964), (4) the ***Israeli-Palestinian conflict*** (which began in 1948, leaving 700,000 refugees; & has acerbated since the Gaza/Hamas conflict began in 1965) , (5) ***conflicts in Nigeria & the Republic of Congo***, (6) Insurgency in the Maghreb/Algeria (including *Burkina Faso*), (7) the ***Boko Haram*** in Niger & Chad in Africa, (8) the South ***Sudanese*** Civil War, (9) the North ***Mali*** conflict, (10) the insurgency in ***Egypt***, (11) war in the ***Ukraine*** & ***Crimea***, (12) the Anglophone Crisis in ***Cameroon***, and (13) the war between ***Colombia and Venezeula*** in South America over ***Catatumbo***.

That list comes to ***over a dozen active wars and ethnic conflicts*** all across the globe. (!) So… what is our role as Christians, or as Americans, ***to work toward “peace*** on earth and ***goodwill*** among men”?

Time does not allow me to mention the conflict in ***Indonesia*** over ***West Papua*** (which began in 1963), or the ***Moro*** conflict in the Philippines (which started in 1969)…

… or the internal conflict in ***Peru*** (which began in 1980), or the long-standing “***dissident Irish Republican campaign***” in the United Kingdom. There are insurgencies in the Khyber Pass in Pakistan, in the Punjab and the Sindh (both in ***Pakistan***), in ***Paraguay***, and in the ***North Caucasus*** (of Russia). There is the ***Sinai insurgency*** in Egypt, the ***Syrian Civil War spillover*** in Lebanon, and the Islamist ***insurgency*** in Mozambique. (!)

All through the Christmas season, the phrase we heard was about ***“Peace on Earth, and Goodwill toward men.”*** The Gospel of Luke tells us that an angelic choir sang those words as ***a message from God Almighty*** to shepherds keeping night watch on the hills around the town Bethlehem. It reminds me that our task (on this first week of the New Year, as at all times) is ***not to make war***, but to do what we can to ***bring peace & goodwill*** among people. And how’s that going just now?

Huge ***Israeli settlements*** have displaced those shepherds from their hills nowadays, and the wall called a “Separation Barrier” makes it impossible for ***Palestinians*** in Bethlehem to get out on to those hills anymore. *(So much for “****goodwill*** *among men”, right?)*  Fortunately, Israeli ***tourism*** has made a way for ***Christian foreigners*** to get through the checkpoints and still get to see the site of the original Manger.

Times sure have ***changed*** in the Holy Land since Jesus’ birth!

With new calendars hanging on our walls, we realize that it’s been some ***2,020 years*** since that hopeful message first rang out from heaven to earth. After all those centuries of ***re-telling the Nativity story*** and millions of followers of Jesus trying to make God’s Kingdom ***come on earth*** as it is in heaven… it really makes me wonder: ***how have we been doing lately*** with this “peace on earth” stuff?

Have ***you*** personally noticed that there is more ***“goodwill”*** among people? I mean, in an election year, we certainly ***need*** it! ***“Peace on Earth, and Goodwill toward men.”*** (!) Have you seen a ***prevalence*** of “peace” on earth, or are we still flirting with opportunities to make war?

Let me know what you think. Yours, Rev.Paul.Lance@gmail.com

.